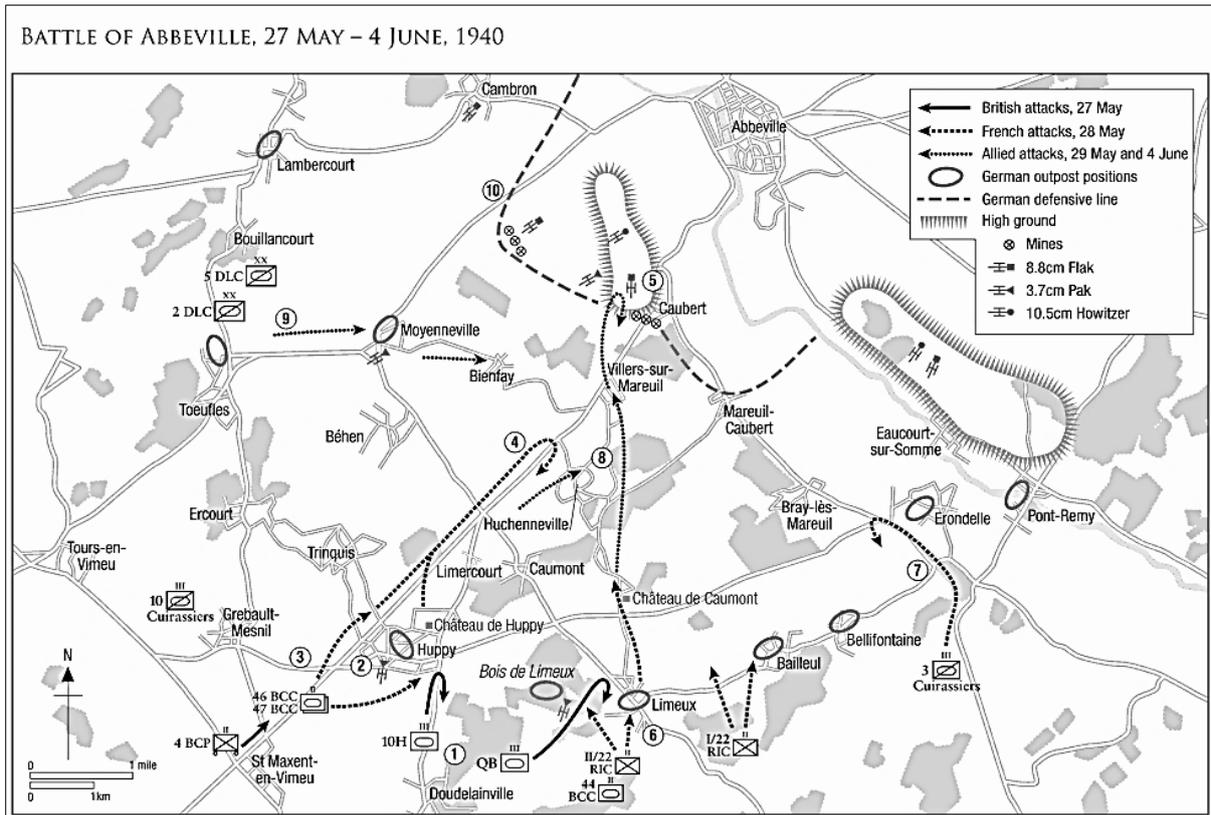


# THE BATTLE OF ABBEVILLE

The  **Battle of Abbeville** commenced on the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1940. German troops had crossed the Somme and established bridgeheads at Abbeville and St Valéry-sur-Somme. The 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division was not involved until the last day of the battle, the 4<sup>th</sup> June. Details of the previous days are well documented in the several books listed in the Sources (pp 120-121)



Map: Robert Forczyk

**4<sup>th</sup> June: Combined dawn plan of attack** – from the Adjutant’s War Diary which was compiled in captivity.

Zero 0330 hours

1. 2-10 artillery barrage to open on Bois de Villers (about a mile from the start line) to cover the noise of tanks coming forward.
2. French heavy tanks to follow the barrage and capture the high ground of **Mont. de Caubert** and **Caesar's Camp** – a Roman Fort - (2½ - 3 miles).
3. 2nd Seaforths to attack Bois de Villers and clear it of enemy, this being their final objective.
4. French light tanks, followed by 4th Seaforths to advance on a two Company front ('B' on right, and 'C' on left) on each side of the Bois de Villers, to attack the Mont de Caubert and consolidate this objective.
5. French Dragon Porte (mechanised infantry) to advance through 4th Seaforths and follow the heavy tanks to Mont. de Caubert and Caesar's Camp and hold this ground until the arrival of the slower moving infantry.

There was the difficulty of arranging effective co-operation between British and French infantry, guns and tanks at such short notice. Advancing from the wooded slopes east of Bienfay, the 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforths approached the rise of the **Mont de Caubert** but the tanks were blown up by mines, or gun-fire hit and they were disabled. The Seaforths went on without them but ran into machine-gun fire. Some survivors reached their first objective, about six hundred yards up the slope but were few in number.

**Captain Patrick Munro** (PM) of 'C Company later stated that:

*"Maps were very scarce and all I had was a 1912 Michelin road map which I had to share with Simon Fraser"* [Company Commander of 'B' Company].

*The CO came along and said he was sorry but we should just have to start with the one tank instead of 18. We all stood up and started the advance at a steady pace with bayonets fixed, preceded by a solitary tank!*

*We advanced in open order through open country, covered mostly by corn crops which came up to just below our knees. There was a very heavy dew and our legs were soaking wet in five minutes. Our first half hour went entirely according to plan and there seemed to be no opposition for some hundreds of yards. I heard the occasional bullet whistling over our heads but the noise of the barrage was so terrific we could hear little else. As we proceeded, light automatic and rifle fire became more apparent, and I began to see men being hit and spinning round like shot rabbits. Meanwhile, my solitary tank was rumbling along in front of us, doing quite good work and knocking out isolated Bosch [sic] posts here and there."*

*Opposition began to get stiffer and stiffer and soon the advance began to slow down and finally halted. I could see no signs of the Companies on our right or left and so went to investigate. Our right boundary was a small ridge about five feet high and I crawled up to this and had a look over. As soon as I put my head over, a hail of fire came from in front and rear. The Jocks by now were all lying down in any small fold in the ground they could find, and firing from that position. Casualties were becoming heavier every minute and there seemed to be no hope of advancing further, under what was now very heavy fire. Shelling had now increased considerably. I decided to withdraw the Company back to where the 2nd Seaforths were in the Bois de Villers.*

*The whole attack had failed, and the CO [Lt Col H W Houldsworth] had been wounded ..... Soon, after it got dark, orders came through to the effect that the Battalion would withdraw that night to the village of Zailleux."* [Les Alleux].

'B' Company was virtually wiped out. Simon Fraser and all his officers who had taken part in the attack had been killed and only about 40 men survived, so they were attached to 'C' Company.



**Photo: Clare Church**

This scene (looking northwards) shows a calvary erected in 1918, destroyed by the Germans in 1944 and reconstructed in 1953. The French soldier's helmet, made of concrete, stands alongside. On Caesar's camp beyond, there is evidence of dugouts for German machine guns.



**German defences on Mont de Caubert**